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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a theoretical model of sucide, based on the theory of "external restraints" proposed by previous researchers, A.F. Henry and J.F. Short, Jr., and applies the model to a study of black suicides in Orleans Parish, Louisiana. The focus of the study is on the complexity of relationships between dimensions of black suicide and the social, demographic, and economic characteristics of blacks in the United States. Some of the variables considered include sex, age, marital status, social status, and community integration. It is pointed out that the theory of "external restraints" is only weakly sustained by the analysis. It is concluded that more adequate testing of the theory must await further data, with careful attention to the subjective aspects of hypothesized structural relationships. (Author/EB)

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DIMENSIONS OF BLACK SUICIDE: A THEORETICAL MODEL

Robert Davis
and James F. Short, Jr.

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DIMENSIONS OF BLACK SUICIDE: A THEORETICAL MODEL

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Dimensions of Black Suicide: A Theoretical Model

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ABSTRACT: This paper has two purposes: (1) to develop a theoretical model of suicide, based on the previous work of Henry and Short, and (2) to apply that model in the study of black suicides in Orleans Parish, Louisiana. In so doing, we are focusing on suicide among a traditionally low-status, low-suicide population group, one which Henry and Short cited in support of the positive relationship between status and suicide. The generality of the theory is thus examined in this and other ways. The theory of "external restraints" is only weakly sustained by this analysis. More adequate testing of the theory must await further data, with careful attention to the subjective aspects of hypothesized structural relationships.

This paper examines recent data on trends and factors associated with black suicide. Our major concern centers on two objectives: (1) reevaluation of external-restraint theory and (2) elaboration of five major independent variables (proposed as determinants of black suicide) into a more systematic theoretical framework.

Theoretical Model

The major theoretical stance in sociological literature on suicide stems from Durkheim (1897), who proposed that suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of groups to which the individual belongs. Although this proposition has been restated subsequently in various ways, the formulations of Henry and Short (1954) and Maris (1969) are the most relevant for the present research. These re-

Dr. Davis is on sabbatical from North Carolina A & T State University. The authors wish to acknowledge with deepest appreciation the advice and help of John Finney and thank him for his most helpful methodological critique and suggestions.

searchers advance the general proposition that suicides vary inversely with external restraints in the form of social structures, relationships, and groups to which the individuals belong. The importance of internal restraints is recognized but not systematically studied in their work.

Henry and Short (1954) posit two types of "external restraints," defined as "the degree to which behavior is required to conform to the demands and expectations of other persons": (1) *vertical* restraint deriving from one's super- or subordinate position, as in the class system or any other relevant status hierarchy; (2) *horizontal* restraint deriving from involvement in social relationships with others. The following propositions are developed: (1) "the strength of external restraint to which behavior is subjected varies positively with the strength of the relational system and inversely with position in the status hierarchy" (Henry & Short, 1954); it follows that (2) suicide varies negatively with strength of relational systems and (3) positively with status.

Henry and Short regarded low suicide rates among blacks as confirming evidence of the hypothesized relationship between vertical restraints and suicide. This paper examines the nature of relationships between suicide and variables specified in external-restraint theory *within* this status group. The remainder of the paper sets forth a theoretical model, which we believe approximates somewhat better than the original Henry-Short formulation, of the complexity of relationships between dimensions of Black suicide and the social, demographic, and economic characteristics of blacks in the United States. The model specifies the dependent variable as suicide (dummy variable X_6), and community integration (X_5), status (X_4), strength of the relational system (X_3), age (X_2), and sex (X_1) as exogenous variables.

Following Henry and Short, primary interest in the model is in the explanatory power of two specific independent variables, status and strength of the relational system (X_4 and X_3, respectively) on suicide (X_6). In addition, the model permits determination of the conditional probability of dying by suicide for members of age and sex categories.

The relationship between status and suicide has not been clearly established in the literature. The zero-order relationship between social class and suicide has been reported to be direct, inverse, and curvilinear (Breed, 1963; Dublin, 1963; Gibbs, 1961; Henry & Short, 1954; Labovitz, 1968; Maris, 1969; Powell, 1958; Rushing, 1968). It is quite possible that each of these findings is valid because the association between social status and suicide may depend upon the particular population studied (see Maris, 1969), and the confounding r-

lationship among different populations of strength of relational systems. In this research occupation as listed on death certificates is used as an indicator of social status, a common procedure in the sociological literature on suicide (Breed, 1966; Gibbs & Martin, 1964; Maris, 1969; Powell, 1958).

Marital status, urban-rural residence, and ecological distribution[1] were viewed by Henry and Short (1954) as indicators of the variable "strength of the relational system," defined as "the degree of involvement in social or cathectic relationships with other persons." Henry and Short assumed that "the relational system of the married is stronger, on the average, than is the relational system of the unmarried." They also assumed that persons living in outlying residential districts of cities have stronger relational systems than residents of inner city areas characterized by extremes of residential mobility and anonymity. Finally, age was hypothesized to be related both to strength of the relational system and to status, in that social status and "the degree of involvement in social relationships decrease with increasing age." As Short (1972) has pointed out more recently, ecological areas also have status implications, and both status and the strength of relational systems among population groupings may vary over time, thus altering theoretical relationships. In modern societies it seems likely that the relation of age to status is curvilinear, rising from childhood to the mid-years of adulthood and declining thereafter with retirement and old age. Inner cities are characterized not only by high rates of mobility and anonymity, but also by important forms of organization and by great variations in status. More fine-grained examination of these relationships, therefore, is necessary before the theory can be tested adequately. This paper is a first step toward solution of these problems.

Data and Method

We focus on black suicide over a 20-year period (1954-1973) in New Orleans, a large urban southern community in which blacks account for more than 45% of the total population. Primary data sources were death records (death certificates, day records, and annual reports) compiled by the Louisiana State Bureau of Vital Statistics and the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office. Interest centers on black deaths classified as suicides, accidents, homicides, and natural deaths. Non-suicides are included in order to facilitate calculation of the conditional probability of dying by suicide.

[1] "Community integration" is used in this paper in much the same way as ecological distribution in the Henry and Short research.

Multiple-regression analysis is used to determine the net effect of each independent variable in our model on black suicide. The regression coefficients (interpreted as incremental probabilities of dying by suicide) allow determination of the nature and extent of changes across the two decades in the relationship between black suicide and the five structural variables in the model. Expressed somewhat differently, the model allows us to determine whether the conditional probability of dying by suicide has changed for the two decades. The objective of this procedure is to determine whether changes in the black suicide rate for the two decades can be linked to differential operation of the structural variables.

Data for the study consist of 779 death certificates in the records of the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office. These comprise all of the officially recorded black suicides (n = 206), by residence, in Orleans Parish, from 1954 through 1973. In addition, all black homicides (N = 110), accidental deaths (n = 232), and a 25% sample of black natural deaths (N = 231) occurring in Orleans Parish for the years 1959 and 1969 (mid-points of the two decades under study were also recorded).

A 25% systematic sample of the natural deaths yielded sufficiently large numbers for empirical analysis. We did not study natural deaths with the following characteristics: (1) stillbirths, (2) early infant deaths, and (3) deaths in which little or nothing is known about the deceased. We wished to minimize the possibility of overloading our sample with very young deaths and death certificates with incomplete information (where the likelihood of misclassification of cause of death also seems high).

A 20-year sample was necessary in order to study recent trends, and because black suicide is a relatively infrequent event.

The Probability of Dying by Suicide

Table 1 describes the frequency and percentage of black deaths in Orleans Parish by various causes. The stability of black suicide over time is notable. At no time during the 20-year period under study did the number of black suicides account for more than 1% of the total number of black deaths. During the last 3 years (1971-1973) studied, however, the percentage of black deaths accounted for by suicide rises rapidly.

Researchers disagree as to whether black suicide rates have increased (Banks, 1970; Diggory, 1976; Seiden, 1970; Slater, 1973). For the United States as a whole, Diggory has examined trends of race- and age-specific suicide rates between 1933-1968. Trends are complex, but slopes *positive* when they are significant, for all race and sex groups, for the period, 1951-1968, while during the period 1933-1950, they are slightly negative when significant. Positive trends are found most often among younger age groups in all four race-sex groupings. Slopes do not vary consistently between racial groups, and Diggory (1976) points out that "the ratios of white to non-white av-

TABLE 1

Black Deaths by Selected Causes, Orleans Parish, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1954-1973

Year	All Black Deaths	Suicide Number	Suicide % of Total	Homicide Number	Homicide % of Total	Accidental Number	Accidental % of Total	Natural Number	Natural % of Total
1954	2194	7	.31	63	2.87	90	5.7	7010	91.0
1955	2285	9	.39	67	2.93	94	3.9	2115	92.7
1956	2356	10	.42	51	2.16	97	4.2	2198	93.3
1957	2622	7	.26	57	2.17	108	4.1	2450	93.4
1958	2636	6	.72	54	2.04	107	4.2	2468	93.5
1959	2709	3	.11	64	2.36	111	4.1	2531	93.4
1960	2760	7	.25	58	2.10	97	3.5	2598	94.1
1961	2631	8	.30	51	1.93	108	4.1	2464	93.7
1962	2687	7	.26	57	2.12	110	4.1	2513	93.5
1963	2790	5	.17	73	2.61	114	4.1	2598	93.1
1964	2965	9	.30	69	2.32	105	3.4	2782	93.8
1965	2987	4	.13	91	3.04	106	3.4	2786	96.0
1966	299	12	.40	105	3.55	121	5.9	2715	90.9
1967	.725	11	.40	110	4.03	130	4.9	2474	90.1
1968	2960	11	.37	101	3.41	122	4.1	2727	92.1
1969	2855	12	.42	96	3.36	138	4.8	2609	91.4
1970	2963	10	.33	96	3.23	121	4.1	2736	92.3
1971	2815	19	.67	119	4.22	115	4.1	2562	91.0
1972	3004	22	.73	242	8.05	123	4.1	2617	87.1
1973	2934	27	.91	178	6.07	121	4.0	2630	89.6
TOTAL	54,855	206	.37	1802	3.28	2,238	4.1	50,585	92.3

Source: Bureau of Vital Statistics, Louisiana Department of Public Health, New Orleans, Louisiana.

erage teenage suicide rates are nearly identical in 1951-1968 and 1933-1950."

In order to examine possible differences in the operation of variables in our model, analysis is performed for each of two periods. 1954-1963 and 1964-1973. Emphasis is upon determining whether the net effect of each variable on suicide is the same for both periods. To the extent that net effects differ, the independent variables will have operated differently in the two time periods with respect to black suicide.

Zero-Order Relationships

Table 2 presents zero-order relationships between each independent variable and suicide for each decade separately and for the entire 20-year period. Each independent variable is weakly, but negatively, related to suicide in each time period. Age has the highest correla-

TABLE 2

Zero-Order Correlations Among All Variables Under Investigation Designated as Determinants of Black Suicide in the City of New Orleans, Louisiana, 1954–1973

Period	Variable	X_1	X_2	X_3	X_4	X_5	X_6
1954–1973	X_1	1.000	.199	.247	-.423	.036	-.065
1954–1963			.107	.188	-.558	-.002	-.011
1964–1973			.255	.286	-.329	.038	-.035
1954–1973	X_2		1.000	.525	-.167	.044	-.272
1954–1963				.536	-.184	.031	-.307
1964–1973				.516	-.118	.067	-.250
1954–1973	X_3			1.000	-.179	.013	-.190
1954–1963					-.261	-.025	-.228
1964–1973					-.118	.008	-.160
1954–1973	X_4				1.000	-.002	-.170
1954–1963						-.018	-.219
1964–1973						-.028	-.136
1954–1973	X_5					1.000	.034
1954–1963							.006
1964–1973							.059
	X_6						1.000

X_1 = Sex
X_2 = Age
X_3 = Strength of relational system
X_4 = Social status
X_5 = Community integration
X_6 = Suicide

tions with suicide (younger blacks accounting for more suicides than their elders), while the two variables on which we wish to focus primarily (social status and strength of the relational system) have slightly higher correlations with suicide than do sex or community integration.

As noted above, the relationship of age to external restraint, and hence to suicide, was a problem for Henry and Short (1954). When conceptualized in terms of status (older persons generally being of lower status due to retirement from economic and social responsibilities, loss of earning power, etc.), age would be expected to be negatively related to suicide. Yet age clearly brings with it alterations in relational systems. The hypothesis that "the degree of involvement in social relationships decreases with increasing age" was regarded as crucial to interpretation of the declining sensitivity of both male and female suicide to business cycles after the age of 65. But what of the relation of age to strength of relational systems throughout the life span? Among the New Orleans blacks in our sample of deaths, age and strength of the relational system are *positively* related (see Table 1). Age and status, as expected, are negatively (but weakly) related.

Thus, viewed across the age span, older persons in this population had stronger relational systems and slightly lower status than did younger persons. Both types of external restraints among the aged, according to the theory, predict lower suicide rates. These "predictions" are, as we have seen, weakly sustained in our data. Marital status (X_3 = strength of the relational system) is negatively, but weakly, related to suicide as hypothesized. Among this population, occupation (X_4 = social status) also is slightly negatively related to suicide, contrary to theoretical expectations.

Zero-order relationships between sex (X_1 coded as: 1 = male, 2 = = female), and social status (X_4) indicate that for each of the three periods, females tended to have lower status and stronger relational systems than males. Since both relationships are predictive of lower suicide rates, the empirical relationship between sex and suicide in our data is weaker than expected.

Using the logic of the linear model, age explains 7.4% ($[.274]^2$) of the variation in suicide for our 20-year sample. Coefficients of explained variation (r^2 for each of the correlations in Table 2) were computed, but are not here presented. Relationships in general are somewhat stronger during the earlier decade than in more recent years (e.g., for age, 9.4% vs. 6.3%). Sex and community integration are particularly low in predictive power.

An index of community integration was computed by analyzing the distribution of major crimes occurring in New Orleans. The index was obtained by dividing the percent of major offenses (for each of the city's eight police districts) by the percent of the population residing in each district. These standardized district values are then ranked from highest to lowest values and the district corresponding to each value is assigned a community index score ranging from 0 to 5. The weak relationship between suicide and community integration in Table 2 is contrary to theoretical expectation, in that communities with scores indicating higher integration have slightly higher suicide rates. This relationship is reversed in the multiple regression, as we shall see, below.

Zero-order relationships between these variables represent the upper limit of the effects of each variable on suicide. To determine the net effect of each independent variable on suicide, we turn to multiple-regression analysis.

Overall Results of the Theoretical Model

Table 3 presents multiple-regression and multiple-correlation coefficients for the equations predicting suicide from sex, age, strength of the relational system, social status, and community integration, as we have operationalized them. These coefficients provide the informa-

TABLE 3

Regression Coefficients, Residual Paths, and Coefficients of Determination for the Dependent Variable Suicide Regressed on Five Independent Variables for Three Time Periods

Time Span	Dependent Variable	b_0 (Intercept)	$b_1 r_{12}$	$b_2 r_{23}$	$b_3 r_{34}$	$b_4 r_{45}$	$b_5 r_{56}$	Multiple R	Coefficient of Determination (R^2)
1954–1963	X_6	.8987	.0354	−.0061	−.0207	.0423	.0021	.3530	.1246
1964–1973	X_6	.7308	.0845	−.0050	−.0211	.0383	.0204	.2872	.0825
1954–1973	X_6	.7867	.0591	−.0053	−.0223	.0333	.0067	.3099	.0905

X_1 = Sex
X_2 = Age
X_3 = Strength of relational system
X_4 = Social status
X_5 = Community integration
X_6 = Suicide

tion needed to evaluate the variable linkages in our model. Multiple-regression coefficients are interpreted as incremental probabilities of dying by suicide.[2] They represent the increment or decrement in the probability of committing suicide for each variable in each of the three time periods. We are thus able to determine the nature and extent of any changes across the two decades in the relationship between suicide and the five structural variables.

Sex

With other variable effects removed, the sign of the relationship between sex and suicide is reversed from the negative relationship

[2] The following equation defines the structure of the multiple-regression coefficients:

$$x^6 = B_0 + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 + B_4X_4 + B_5X_5$$

where

X_6 is the expected value of Y (the conditional probability of dying by suicide);
B_0 (the intercept) is a function of the percent of suicides *in our sample only* and carries no inherent substantive meaning;
B_1 is the increment due to knowledge of a person's sex, holding X_2 through X_5 constant;
B_2 is the increment due to knowledge of a person's age, holding X_1, X_3, X_4, X_5 constant;
B_3 is the increment due to knowledge of the strength of the relational system, holding X_1, X_2, X_4, X_5 constant;
B_4 is the increment due to knowledge of status, holding X_1, X_2, X_3, X_5 constant;
B_5 is the increment due to knowledge of the degree of community integration, holding X_1 through X_4 constant.

found in the zero-order correlations (sex coded as: 1 = male, 2 = female). The difference between males and females' probabilities of dying by suicide (holding all other variables constant) is .0354 for the 1954-1963 decade, and .0845 for the 1964-1973 decade.

For the 20-year period, and for each decade, sex has a small independent effect on suicide when other variable effects are removed. The probability of female suicides was 6% (B_1 = .0591) higher than that of males over the 20 years studied, 8.45% for the years, 1964-1973, and 3.5% for 1954-1963.

Age

The independent effect of age on suicide (when other variables are held constant) is −.0053 for the entire 20-year period. The "predicted proportion" of suicides in our sample thus decreases by about .5% for each year of age for New Orleans blacks. The difference between the regression effect for age during the two 10-year periods (holding all other variables constant) is −.0011. For the 1954-1963 decade each year of age decreases the proportion of suicides by .0061, each 10 years of age by .061 (when other variable effects are held constant). In these terms, the probability that a 40-year-old died by suicide was 6% less than that probability for a 30-year-old during the earlier decade (holding other variables constant). For the 1964-1973 decade each year of age decreases the probability of suicide by .005; each 10 years by 5% (holding other variables constant).

Strength of the Relational System

Holding other variables constant, the difference between the probability of dying by suicide for married and unmarried is −.0207 for the 1954-1963 decade, −.0211 for the 1964-1973 decade, and −.0223 over the entire period. The independent effect of the relational system (marriage) on suicide thus is in the predicted direction, but quite small.

Social Status

The multiple-regression analysis indicates, contrary to the observed zero-order relationship, that increases in status (occupation) are accompanied by increases in suicide. The predicted positive relationship between status and suicide is weak, however, and slightly stronger during the earlier of the two decades studied (4.23% compared to 2.83%).

The independent effect of status on suicide among blacks for the 20-year period thus is 3.3% (β_4 = .0333). That is, probability of dying by suicide increases by about 3 percentage points for each increment on the status scale. Thus, while the overall effect of status (occupation) on the probability of dying by suicide is not great, when other variables in the model are statistically controlled, differences in suicide probabilities between status categories are considerable. Table 4 presents these differences for the occupational scale employed in this analysis. As an illustration, the probability that a suicide in our sample was committed by a service worker was .2961 below the probability that the suicide was committed by a manager or official ([−.3807] − [−.0846] in Table 4) during the 1954-1963 decade. We would have preferred to use the Duncan scale as a measure of occupational status. The lack of sufficient information on death records forced use of the U.S. census occupational codes. Linearity checks were inconclusive, so the "decrements" between status (occupational) levels should not be taken literally. The general relationship between status and suicide is portrayed in Table 4, however.

Community Integration

In the multiple-regression analysis community integration decreases slightly the likelihood of suicide. The relationship is somewhat strong-

TABLE 4

Detriments in the Probability of Suicide for Blacks in the City of New Orleans, Louisiana, as One Moves Down the Status Ladder, 1954-1963, 1964-1973, 1954-1973

		Status Ladder	1954-1963	1964-1973	1954-1973
Upper	0	Professional, technical and kindred workers	.0000	.0000	.0000
Middle	1	Proprietors (except farm)	-.0423	-.0283	-.0333
	2	Managers and officials	-.0846	-.0566	-.0666
	3	Clerical and sales workers	-.1269	-.0849	-.0999
	4	Kindred workers	-.1692	-.1132	-.1332
	5	Craftsmen	-.2115	-.1415	-.1665
Lower	6	Operative (except transport)	-.2538	-.1698	-.1998
	7	Farm laborers and foremen and other laborers	-.2961	-.1981	-.2331
	8	Farmers and farm managers	-.3384	-.2264	-.2664
	9	Service workers, including private households	-.3807	-.2547	-.2997
	10	Unemployed, retired, student, disabled, and housewives	-.4230	-.2830	-.3330

TABLE 5

Decrements in the Probability of Dying by Suicide for Blacks in the City of New Orleans, Louisiana, as Communities Become More Integrated, 1954-63, 1964-73, 1954-1973

Degree of Community Integration	1954-1963	1964-1973	1954-1973
0 Low	.0000	.0000	.0000
1	-.0021	-.0204	-.0067
2 Medium	-.0042	-.0408	-.0134
3	-.0063	-.0612	-.0201
4 High	-.0084	-.0816	-.0268
5	-.0105	-.1020	-.0335

er for the more recent decade. Each increment in the level of community integration decreases the probability of suicide by .0021, for the 1954-1963 period, and by .0204 from 1964-1973.

Table 5 reports differences in the probability of dying by suicide in communities with varying degrees of integration (operationalized in terms of crime rates). The effects of community integration are greater during the more recent decade than during the earlier period (.0204 for each unit of integration, 1964-1973, compared to .0021 for 1954-1963).

Discussion

This paper has two purposes: (1) development of a theoretical model of suicide, based on the previous work of Henry and Short (1954) and (2) application of that model in the study of black suicides in Orleans Parish, Louisiana. In so doing, we are focusing on suicide among a traditionally low-status, low-suicide population group, one which Henry and Short cited in support of the positive relationship between status and suicide. The generality of the theory is thus examined in this and other ways.

Strength of the relational system, defined in this study as marital status, accounts for little of the variation in black suicide, though the relationship is inverse, as specified by the theory. We need to know much more about the qualitative aspects of marriage, as they are associated with suicide, before adequate evaluation of this theoretical notion can be carried out.

Social status, defined here in terms of occupation, is positively related to the black suicides studied, as hypothesized. But the relationship is weak and our measure of status is crude.

Given the positive theoretical relationship between external re-

straint and strength of the relational system, and the negative relationship between external restraint and status, the predicted negative relation of suicide to strength of relational systems and the positive relation of suicide to status are sustained, but only weakly.

Relationships between age and sex and suicide differ from those found by Henry and Short (1954). These relationships are of both substantive and theoretical interest. Age is related both to strength of relational systems and status. Among the population studied, age is positively related to strength of the relational system of marriage and inversely, but weakly, related to status (occupation), both predictive of an inverse relationship with suicide. The prediction is sustained, but weakly, in both zero-order and multiple-correlation analysis. Females among our population also have a slightly stronger relational system (in marriage) and lower status (occupation). The weak negative zero-order relationship between being female and committing suicide is reversed in the multiple-correlation analyses. When the influence of other variables was held constant, females were more likely to commit suicide than males, particularly during the more recent period studied (1964-1973). This apparent reversal of theoretical expectation may have to do with traditional sex roles among American blacks, as suggested by Henry and Short, and it may relate to weaknesses in operationalizing both strength of relational systems and social status. Our data are inadequate to resolve such questions.

Generalizations of the theory of external restraints make explicit some of the problems of the original formulation. The theory is sustained, but weakly, in this analysis of black suicide. More adequate testing of the theory must await more and better data, with careful attention to the subjective aspects of hypothesized structural relationships.

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Vehicle Drivers and Fatal Accidents

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ABSTRACT: This study attempts an exploratory study of the question, What happens to drivers of vehicles involved in accidents in which there is a fatality, whether or not the driver was at fault? The purpose of the investigation was to attempt to determine what, if any, crisis intervention is needed for such drivers. A total of 33 drivers participated who were involved in such an accident from 6 months to 11 years prior to the interviews. Major findings are (1) the range of time for drivers to resolve their crises seemed to be from a few hours to years after the accident, (2) the crises created many psychosocial and physical problems for these drivers, (3) the support of family, friends, and significant others was the most important variable for the drivers in crisis resolution, (4) condemnation hindered them most.

The general question of this investigation is, What happens to drivers of vehicles involved in accidents through which there is a fatality, whether or not the driver is at fault? The investigation is a beginning attempt to discover if crisis intervention is needed by these drivers. A search of the literature revealed no research on the subject, although there was tangential research (Brenner, 1967; Little, 1968; Selzer, 1969a, b; Selzer et al., 1968). Tabachnick et al. (1973) studied per-

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